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December 2, 2015

UNH Research Finds Central Americans Less Likely to Migrate if Civilian Police Force in Place

DURHAM, N.H. – The connection between violent crime in Central America and migration by its citizens to the U.S. has been well documented, but new research from the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire shows that this prevalence is closely associated with policing practices. In particular, the study finds that countries that have created community-oriented civilian police forces are the source of fewer emigrants than countries that have not.

In 2014, the number of Central Americans seeking refuge in the U.S. – including 57,000 unaccompanied minors – led to great debate in the U.S. and the desire to better understand why it was happening and how to prevent it.

The research found that the Central America migration emergency is not just a product of U.S. policies on drugs, guns and immigration, but the failure of some governments to protect their citizens. Nicaragua and Panama face some of the same challenges as Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, but their responses to crime have prioritized investing in community-oriented civilian police forces. Investing in community policing models and addressing the conditions that allow crime to thrive have proven successful in reducing migration.

“The experiences of [Nicaragua and Panama] offer important insights,” said Mary Malone, associate professor of political science and recipient of a Carsey School fellowship. “They demonstrate that new democracies can overcome the challenges posed by poverty, inequality and authoritarian rule, and invest in institutions that uphold the rights and safety of their citizens.”

According to Malone, trust in police is significantly higher in Nicaragua and Panama than in the countries that rely on militarized policing strategies – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – and those same people also have more trust that the justice system will convict perpetrators of crime.

“If the United States wants to reduce the number of people fleeing north [from Central America] it must invest more seriously in policing and public security practices that have a track record of success,” Malone said. “After almost two decades, it is clear that iron fist, repressive policing strategies do not work.” Full analysis can be found here:

<https://carsey.unh.edu/publication/children-flee-central-america>.

The Carsey School of Public Policy is nationally acclaimed for its research, policy education and engagement aimed at addressing important societal challenges. The school takes on the pressing issues of the 21st century, striving for innovative, responsive and equitable solutions at all levels of

government and in the for-profit and nonprofit sectors.

The [University of New Hampshire](#), founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 13,000 undergraduate and 2,500 graduate students.

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